THE HARDEST THING OF ALL
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Psalm 130
Matthew 18:21–35

"If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you."
Psalm 130:3–4

Forgiveness is in our vocabulary: in the church we say it quite a bit.
Our frequent use of the vocabulary of forgiveness should not dull our conscience
to the fact of its importance, its absolute irreplaceable importance to all of us.
We cannot have friends without forgiveness, we cannot have family without forgiveness,
we cannot have lasting marriages without forgiveness. But it is difficult, very difficult.
It is very difficult to turn loose pain, especially if the pain has become the new center
of my identity: the new definition of who I am—the wronged, hurt person.
Only the person that hurts, only the one who has been hurt can forgive.
The rest of us are just advisors and commentators.

Fred Craddock
Why Is Forgiveness So Difficult?

I suppose there is not a one of us who was not deeply affected by the murder, last October, of five little Amish girls and the wounding of five others in their classroom. I was. I went to college in the county where that happened. I've seen one-room Amish schools and the farms and barns with hex signs and buggies and the farmer's market in downtown Lancaster, with its wonderful food, fresh vegetables, baked goods, shoofly pie, and the Amish people. Those pictures in the newspaper of small clusters of Amish young women standing, pondering—hand in hand—the evil that had happened, were extraordinary, unforgettable.

Sister Joan Chittister wrote at the time, “It was not the violence suffered by the Amish that stunned people — it was that the Amish community simply refused to hate what had hurt them.”

An Amish grandfather, standing at the foot of one of the graves, said, “Do not think evil of this man.” A delegation of Amish visited the family of the killer, who killed himself at the end of the rampage, and said to them, “Do not leave. Stay in your home here.”

“It was not the violence that shocked us,” Joan Chittister wrote. “It was the forgiveness that followed it for which we were not prepared. It was the lack of recrimination, the dearth of vindictiveness, that left us amazed. Baffled. Confounded. . . . It was the Christianity we all profess but which they practiced that left us stunned. Never had we seen such a thing.”

A follow-up article in the paper in January described how the Amish community had demolished the schoolhouse and built another one nearby, a symbol of hope. Four of the five wounded girls are back in school. And now the community’s capacity for forgiveness has spread. “Amish and non-Amish have given the widow of the gunman and the couple’s three children comfort and unconditional support. Neighbors put up a Christmas tree at the local volunteer fire hall and decorated it with toys and gifts for the family. Soccer players at the local high school have made a point to show their encouragement by attending soccer matches played by the Roberts’ young son, Brice (*New York Times* 30 January 2007).

Amazing. Forgiveness as a spiritual discipline but also as public policy is receiving a lot of attention these days. Greg Jones, Dean of the Divinity School at Duke University, has published a major, book-length exploration, *Embodying Forgiveness*. In the book’s introduction, he observes:

> Forgiveness has long been difficult to embody. . . . Even the invocation of forgiveness has become rather tricky these days. Some of those one might expect to advocate its importance, particularly people in churches, often are precisely the ones arguing against it. They argue that we need firm punishment and demands for justice, particularly in cases of violence and sexual abuse, not forgiveness. Conversely, some of those who often are taken to be hard-headed realists—namely legal scholars and political theorists—have begun to reflect on the possible significance of forgiveness as a means of breaking apart cycles of violence, vengeance, and bitterness for individuals as well as larger social groups. (*Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*)

A case in point is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, led by Anglican Bishop and Nobel Laureate, Desmond Tutu. Not many historians and political analysts thought that South Africa could avoid a

ghastly, bloody revolution, as apartheid slowly came under international pressure and a well-armed and violent insurgency. Even if the political transition from all-white to African authority could be accomplished peacefully, everyone expected a “payback period,” a time of vengeful, bloody retaliation against the police, courts, and armed forces that had enforced apartheid so brutally and violently. But Nelson Mandela and other African leaders came up with the notion of commissions to which perpetrators of violence on both sides would be invited to testify—in exchange for clemency. It was not a perfect system, but the most amazing thing began to happen. As witnesses told their stories of how they had participated in the violence, as victims or perpetrators, the proceedings took on the aura of a confessional. Strong, hard men shed tears. And then the most amazing thing began to happen: healing and hope. Something evil had been interrupted. And so when Bishop Tutu wrote his memoir he called it *No Future without Forgiveness*.

It is tricky. Conventional wisdom is that forgiveness sometimes fails to take seriously the tragedy and pain and suffering caused by evil. You know how it goes: “You can’t forgive him; you can’t let her get away with that.” Forgiveness sometimes feels like betrayal—of the victim, of our family, our faith, our very humanity.

Be very careful about advising victims of abuse to forgive the abuser, the psychologists tell us. Don’t enable evil by overlooking it or minimizing or trivializing it. In fact, forgiveness means confronting evil and pain and suffering, naming it, dealing with it.

Fred Craddock tells a simple but wonderful story of a six-year-old boy whose mother asked him to stop running through the house because he might stumble and fall and hurt himself or break something. So, of course, he ran and stumbled and fell and broke a vase. His father saw it all happen, picked him up, dusted him off, and said, “Don’t worry about it. It’s just a vase.” His mother, however, knelt down and gathered up the shattered pieces and said softly, “It wasn’t just a vase. It was my favorite vase. My mother gave it to me, her mother gave it to her, and I looked forward to giving it to my children.” And she wept, and the little boy wept, and the mother took him in her arms and hugged him and he hugged her back. “Who forgave here, the father or the mother?” Craddock asked. (*Why Is Forgiveness So Difficult?*)

Forgiveness confronts the reality of what has happened but decides to break a cycle of violence and vengeance, decides to be free of it.

Jesus had a lot to say about it:

> “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven.” (Luke 6:37)
>
> “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” he taught his disciples to pray.

One time Peter asked him about it. “How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” The religious tradition, by the way, was that you ought to offer forgiveness three times, so Peter was being very generous. Seven times and then on number eight you’re free to let him have it? No, Jesus said. Seventy-seven, or seventy times seven, which is really a metaphor for “without number; stop counting.”

And then he told a story, which is a vivid, funny story in a painful sort of way. A servant who owed the king a great deal of money was forgiven. But when that same servant encounters another who owes him money, he refuses him forgiveness, grabs him by the throat, and demands repayment. When the king hears about it, he becomes very angry, reverses his decision to forgive, and puts the first servant in jail until he pays, which, given the amount he owes, means forever.

The unforgiving servant has not only missed the point; he is in the process of missing the rest of his life. He has not accepted and embraced his own forgiveness by putting it to work in his relationship with others.

Jesus had a lot to say on the subject of forgiveness. William Willimon reflects on “all those times when Jesus walked about Galilee on bright days. He was forever walking up to folks and, without warning, saying to those whom he met, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ and ‘Go, sin no more; your sins are forgiven.’ Almost nobody ever asked him to forgive them. Jesus knew that without forgiveness being the first word there would be no meeting of God and humanity” (*Thank God It’s Friday*, p. 9).

Centuries ago the great theologian Augustine came up with the radical idea he called *Prevenient Grace*. It’s the idea that God’s grace and forgiveness actually come to us before we ask, before we even think about it. This grace, Augustine said, is the basis of our relationship with God: not our moral goodness, not our theological orthodoxy, certainly not our ecclesiastical credentials, but God’s grace.

William Willimon calls it “Preemptive Forgiveness.” God’s forgiveness precedes repentance. God’s forgiveness is the first word in the Divine-human conversation. “It’s as if,” Willimon says, “when the Father began creating the world, the first word was not, ‘Let there be light,’ but rather, ‘Let there be forgiveness’” (p. 6).

It is the hardest thing of all, I think. We do not like the idea that there is anything about us that needs forgiving. We do not like the word *sin* because of its trivial associations with the sins we were taught to avoid in our childhood: drinking, smoking, and, above all else, sex. We want nothing to do with guilt in any form, particularly religious guilt. We'd like our religion to be positive and upbeat and, frankly, if we put it to a vote, I doubt that the prayer of confession would remain in the worship service.

It is hard, but altogether healthy, to acknowledge that none of us is perfect, that the one thing we all share is that there is a gap between who we are and who we ought to be and could be, which is another way of saying between who we are and who God created us to be.

And it is hard to forgive someone who has wronged us, not only because we're not sure it's right. It is hard to let go of hurt personally. A friend gave me a book recently about the legendary basketball rivalry between Duke and the University of North Carolina. It has the best title I've ever read: *To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy Forever.* It's about a basketball rivalry, but it is also a profound spiritual truth.

There is something about us that, if not happy hating, at least finds it very difficult to let go of the pain, the hurt we experience at the hands of others.

I know someone whose family has suffered the most devastating loss imaginable: the murder of a daughter and sister, her unborn child, and her husband. The young man who did it is in jail and will be for the rest of his life. My friend has thought about this as deeply and more immediately than any theologian or legal scholar. She writes in an article on the death penalty, which she opposes, "Does healing require forgiveness? As a Christian, it does for me. Let me be clear: I forgive the killer not because he has an excuse; he had none whatsoever. I forgive not because he asked for it; he hasn't. I don't forgive for him. I forgive for the One who asked and taught me to—for God; for the author and protector of my faith, Jesus Christ."

The movie *Amazing Grace* is about the story of William Wilberforce and the end of the slave trade in Great Britain, a very profitable enterprise. Wilberforce's mentor and inspiration is an old man by the name of John Newton, a former slave trader, captain of a slave ship, who became convinced that what he was doing was wrong, terribly wrong, a sin against God. Newton's conversion led him to turn around, to get out of the slave business, and to spend the rest of his days doing humble tasks, cleaning floors in a church, as penance, always haunted by his guilt. Wilberforce had known him for a long time and is inspired to mount an effort in Parliament to end the slave trade. Newton encourages him to continue the battle, but

old, frail, he still longs to know God's forgiveness, that he's all right with God, that God's grace is for him in spite of what he did years ago.

It's not clear in the movie whether he ever understands God's "preemptive forgiveness," but he must have, because he's the one, former slave trader John Newton, who wrote,

> Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
> That saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost but now am found,
> Was blind but now I see.

How important is this? How central to our faith? We are deep in Lent now, and the cross looms ahead. When they nailed Jesus to the cross and left him hanging there, his strength fading, the life literally bleeding out of him, looking down, watching as his friends ran away and the authorities mocked and taunted, as soldiers threw dice for what was left of his garments, he spoke. Seven times, the Bible says.

He did not say,

"You're going to burn in hell for this."
"You will get yours one day."
"You'll be sorry."

He did not curse.

He did not say, "God," literally, "damn you for this."

Those who were there heard him say, simply, "Father, forgive them."[1]

Amen.

Notes

1. Thank you to Fred Craddock for the ideas, in *Why Is Forgiveness So Difficult?,* for this conclusion.